THE HISTORY OF

ROCK

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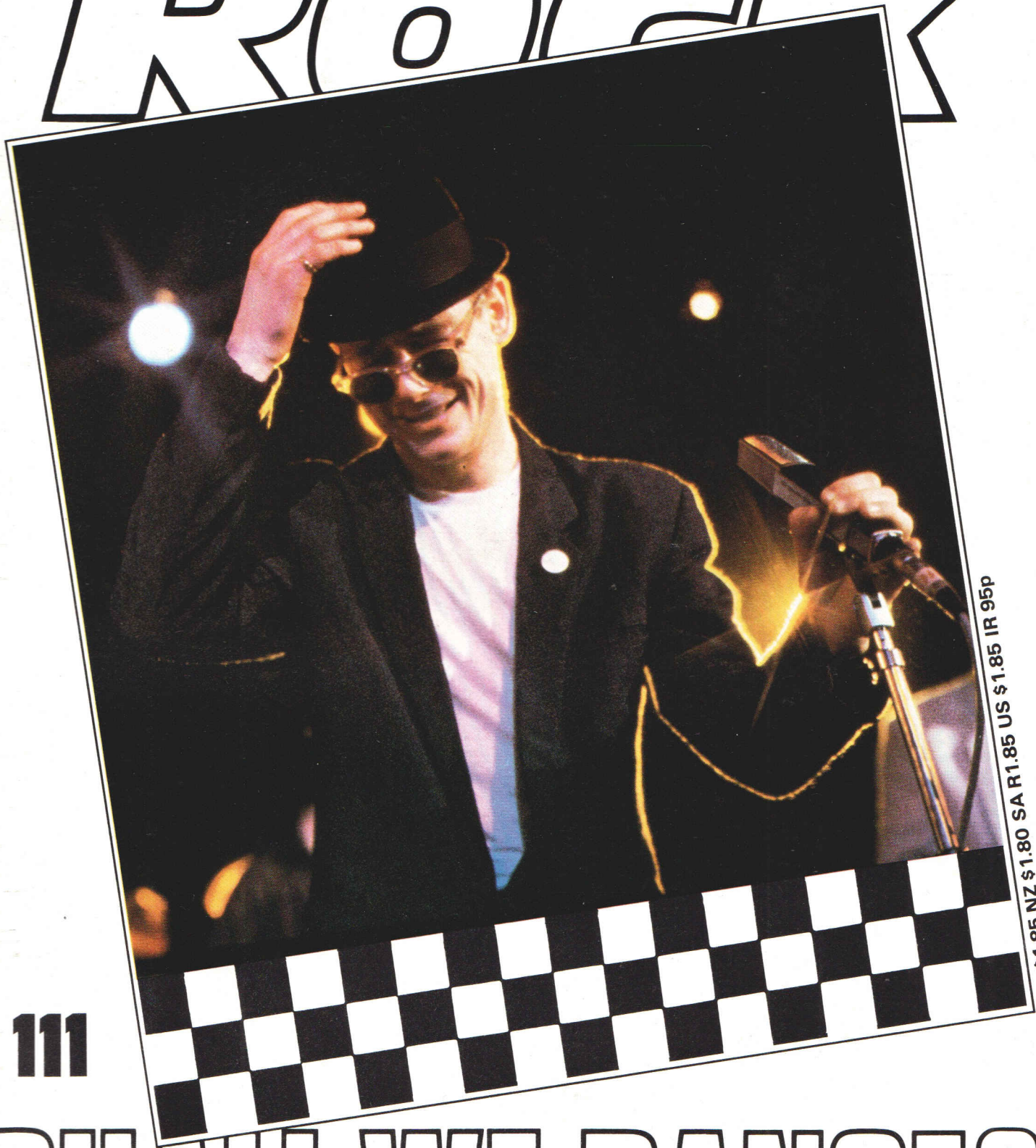

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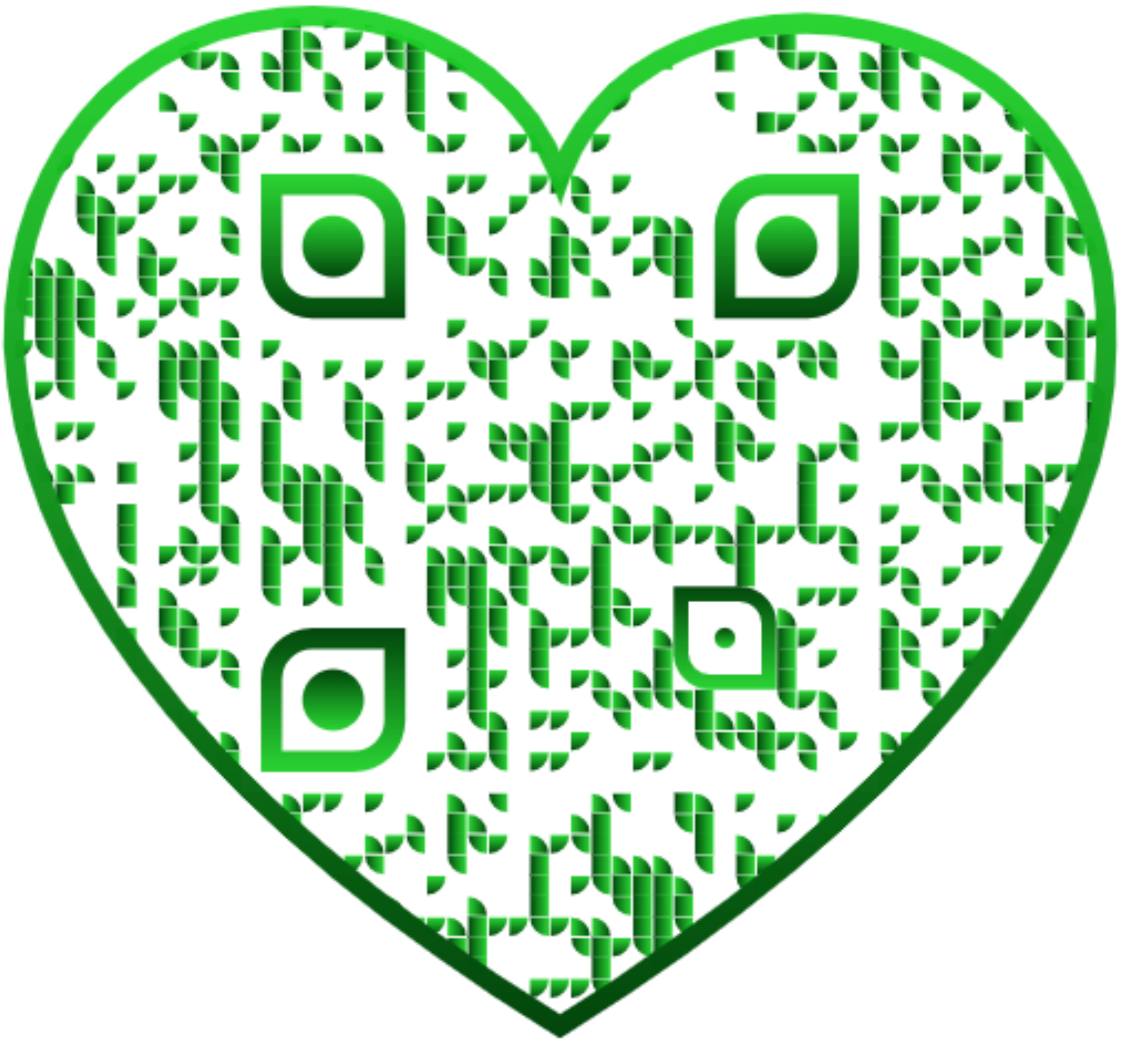

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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As the Seventies drew to a close, the thunder of drums and the wailing and crashing of guitars announced that heavy metal was back with a vengeance on the British rock scene. Among the bands in the vanguard of HM's 'new wave' were Def Leppard and Iron Maiden. With heavy metal firmly back in fashion on a worldwide scale, groups such as Rush from Canada and AC/DC from Australia vied with British bands to see who could play the loudest and heaviest.

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Coventry Calling

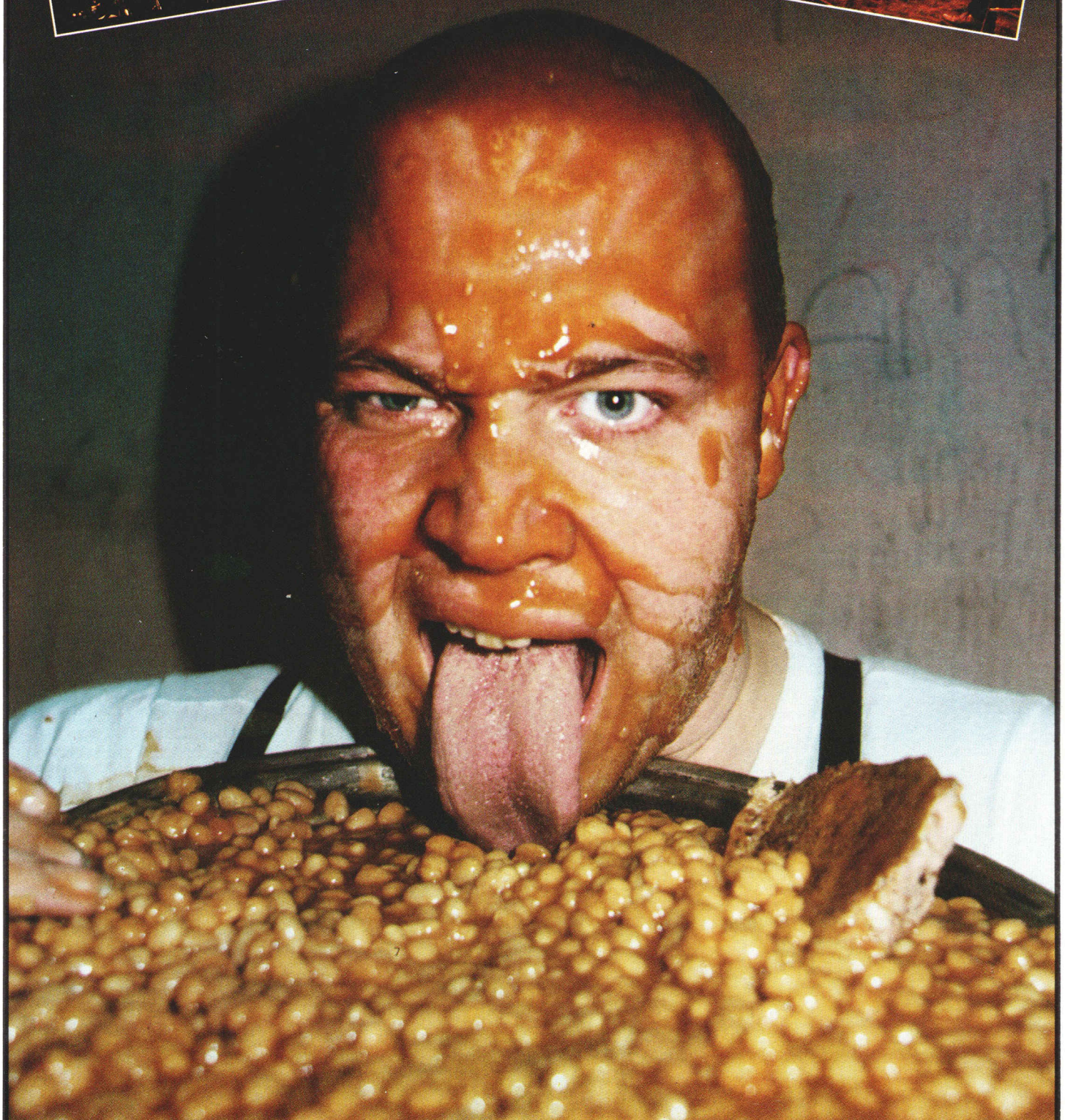
A grey Midlands city set a nation dancing to the 2-Tone beat

2-TONE WAS MORE than a record label, more than a new dance craze, more than the flagship of a ska revival. It was something more contagious: a dance-floor manifesto, a serious attempt to radicalise the conservative imperatives of the music business. For two giddy years its music swept virtually everything before it.

The unlikely architect of this guerrilla campaign against contemporary complacencies was a former art student named Jerry Dammers, a misfit whose energy, determination and idealism inspired the emergence of his group, the Specials, and the 2-Tone movement he built around them. Working with a single Revox tape recorder in the front room of his flat in Coventry, Dammers started shaping songs that were a synthesis of punk's fierce rage and the infectious rhythmic clatter of ska, a music that had first become popular with the Mods in Britain and then the skinheads in the late Sixties.

From those early sessions in Dammers' front room emerged a succession of groups, which culminated in the Special AKA (later called the

Left: Jerry Dammers, the eccentric founder of the Specials and 2-Tone. Top: The Selecter were one of his label's first signings.



Specials), who filled the support slot on the Clash's 1978 On Parole Tour. By the end of the tour, Clash manager Bernie Rhodes wanted to manage the Special AKA: a contract was drawn up, but Dammers refused to sign it. The Special AKA returned to Coventry for a bleak winter spent penniless and unemployed, but they somehow managed to finance the release of 'Gangsters' on the group's own label 2-Tone; 5000 copies were distributed by the independent label Rough Trade, enough to qualify for a chart placing and a deal with Chrysalis soon followed.

Sounds like success

The Specials were soon joined on the label by the Selecter, a project which had now developed from Neol Davies' original song of the same name on the B-side of 'Gangsters' to become a band. The two bands and their managers ran 2-Tone jointly, and the label soon took off. 'Gangsters' reached Number 6, and was quickly followed by Madness' tribute to Prince Buster, 'The Prince', and the Selecter's 'On My Radio'. The Specials were soon back in the Top Ten with 'A Message To You Rudy' and 'Nite Klub', while the Beat charted in November with their 2-Tone debut, 'Tears Of A Clown'.

2-Tone fervour reached a thrilling peak that October when the Specials, Madness (now on the Stiff label with their own debut LP to promote) and the Selecter embarked on an extensive British tour. The following February, the Selecter's striking debut album appeared. Its sound was harder than that of the Specials; songs like 'Black And Blue' and the Number 16 hit 'Three Minute Hero' added a nervy, almost paranoid edge to the 2-Tone sound.

After one single release on 2-Tone, Madness had moved to Stiff, where they were soon to run up a seemingly inexhaustible succession of hits. The Beat quit, too, to found their own label, Go-Feet. They were less abrasive than the Specials, but similarly committed to the causes of racial harmony and nuclear disarmament.

In less amicable mood, the Selecter quit 2-Tone in July 1980. Believing that corporate success was stifling new talent, and encouraging a stereotyped 2-Tone sound, they originally tried to wind up the label – and, when that failed, they quit it. Signing directly to the parent company Chrysalis, the Selecter changed their line-up slightly and released their second LP, *Celebrate The Bullet*, in the spring of 1981.

Dammers continued to try to develop the label, releasing records by veteran Jamaican trombonist Rico, the Swingin' Cats and the Bodysnatchers. The latter, an all-woman band, played a set full of ska classics like '007', 'Monkey Spanner' and 'Double Barrel', and their first 2-Tone single, 'Let's Do Rock Steady' reached Number 22 in March 1980. But for the first time, 2-Tone releases were struggling in the UK charts. The Bodysnatchers split after the failure of their second single, 'Easy Life', a record which represented the more serious, explicitly political direction some of the band, including vocalist Rhoda Dakar, wanted to pursue. Rhoda went on to join the Special AKA, while other members of the band formed the nucleus of the pop-oriented Belle Stars.

Opposite: Buster Bloodvessel, extrovert frontman of Bad Manners, who toured with and played the same kind of ska-influenced music as 2-Tone bands like the Bodysnatchers (inset top left) and Madness (inset top right). Above: The 2-Tone logo and those of the principal groups associated with the label.

The Specials' political affiliations had always been with the left, but their music and image had often attracted right-wing skinheads whose presence was often unsettling and wildly at odds with the group's views. During the original 2-Tone tour there had been a serious outbreak of violence at Hatfield Polytechnic. Early Madness gigs were also a focus for outbreaks of violence that were as upsetting to the groups as for anyone caught up in the often brutal mayhem. The autumn tour realised many of the Specials' worst fears: there were mini-riots at Cardiff and Newcastle that left them in despair. Then in Cambridge a small war broke out. Jerry and Terry intervened, trying to stop the fracas, and were subsequently charged and fined for 'using threatening words and behaviour'.

Disgusted and disillusioned, the Specials decided on a brief sabbatical. Jerry worked on production for Rhoda Dakar, the Apollinaires and the Higsons; drummer Brad formed Race Records, Neville launched a label called Shack and Roddy Radiation gigged with his own band, the rockabilly-based Tearjerkers. In March 1981, *Dance Craze*, an ill-defined documentary film on the 2-Tone phenomenon, was released.

But if time was running out for the Specials, their finest moment was still to come. That summer there were riots throughout Britain, youthful discontent turned to violence and open confrontation with authority. With ironic timing, the Specials released 'Ghost Town', a moving lament for a country that was caving in under the pressure of its own frustrations. To add to the irony, the single went to Number 1 during the week of the Royal Wedding.

Back to basics

No one could have realised how close the Specials were to disintegration. Returning from an American tour, Terry Hall, Lynval Golding and Neville Staples split to form the Fun Boy Three, while Jerry, reverting to the name the Special AKA, built a new group around himself and Brad. By the time they released the astonishing, abrasive 'War Crimes' (1982), the population was already dancing to the glossy beat of the new teen idols; the public wanted escapist entertainment, and the social concerns championed by Dammers no longer seemed relevant to them.

As the 2-Tone star waned, Madness went from strength to strength. All white and – despite their commitment to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – largely apolitical, they fitted into the popular entertainment mould in a way the more abrasive Specials never could. Bad Manners, although they were never on the 2-Tone label, also appropriated the ska sound, linking it with knockabout humour to produce UK Top Ten hits like 'Can Can' (1981) and 'My Girl Lollipop' (1982).

In the circumstances, it was unsurprising that, when 2-Tone released the compilation LP *This Are 2-Tone* in November 1983, it was seen largely as an epitaph to the label. But Jerry Dammers could look back upon what he achieved with the Specials unembarrassed by compromise. 2-Tone was an idea that was realised, an ideal that flourished: the music it promoted would not easily be forgotten.

ALLAN JONES

Dance music for the new depression

THE ORIGINAL SPECIALS were the inspiration behind 2-Tone, one of the most exciting musical movements of the Seventies. The group harnessed the powerful energy of punk to the tuneful, good-natured music of pre-reggae Jamaica: calypso and ska. The music that resulted was thoroughly infectious, particularly live; their enthusiasm was the perfect antidote to the gritted-teeth nihilism of punk rock. But the fun was far from mindless; from their earliest days, the Specials manifested a concern for social problems like unemployment, poverty, racism and violence that particularly affected their bleak Midlands home town of Coventry. The multi-racial line-up presented evidence of their ideas in action.

Ska-faced gangsters

Formed in mid-1977, the band went through a number of names, the best-known being the Coventry Automatics, before eventually settling on the Special AKA for their first release. The line-up consisted of Jerry Dammers (keyboards), John 'Brad' Bradbury (drums), Roddy 'Radiation' Byers (lead guitar), Lynval Golding (rhythm guitar), 'Sir Horace Gentleman' Panter (bass) and vocalists Neville Staples and Terry Hall.

The sound of the group was a remarkable fusion of seemingly disparate elements: a solidly swinging rhythm section peppered by stinging work on the rims of the drums from 'Prince Rimshot' (Brad); Roddy Radiation's venomous punk guitar breaks; Dammers' mad fairground organ and Terry Hall's sardonic vocal delivery set against the rumbustious toasting of Neville Staples. The group's outrageously energetic stage act gathered such momentum that, by the end of most gigs, a large proportion of audience had joined the band on stage. The live sound was often fleshed out by brass, most notably the golden horn of veteran Jamaican trombonist Rico.

The Clash's Joe Strummer was an early convert to the Special sound, and he arranged for the band to get the support slot on his band's 1978 tour of the UK. It was a dispiriting experience for the band facing a series of audiences whose narrow-minded preconceptions about punk led them to react with indifference, if not outright scorn.

Having failed to make friends and influence people, the Special AKA withdrew to reconsider their strategy. This resulted in the birth of the 2-Tone project, intended more as a musical manifesto than a mere record label. A former art-college student, Dammers designed the famous 2-Tone logo himself and, in a statement announcing the birth of the label, it was heralded as an operation 'run by musicians instead of businessmen'.

It was also Dammers who wrote the first single, a savage attack on the music business entitled 'Gangsters' with an appropriate nod to Prince Buster, an inspirational figure to both the Specials and Madness. The whole band pooled all their available cash to get the single recorded. They did not have enough money to record a B-side so this was eventually provided by Neol Davies, a local musician who was billed as the Selecter and would later form a band of the same name and sign to 2-Tone. A distribution deal was struck with noted independent outfit Rough Trade in March 1979, and the single was released shortly afterwards.

Rick Rodgers, the band's shrewd new manager, organised a small tour of London's clubs, places where the band could start to gather a following and hope to attract some interest from the major

Above: The original Specials pose in Ghost Town. Left: A Nite Club audience lap up the group's energetic stage act.

By the beginning of 1980, the Specials were in a position to undertake their first visit to the US, where they played a long series of dates, some supporting the Police, others as headliners in their own right. But the first signs of things to come were apparent when several members of the band admitted that their heart was not in some of the later dates.

Live and dangerous

Back in the UK, however, the story was utterly different. To compensate fans for their absence in America, the Specials released a live EP, *The Special AKA Live*, which contained a version of 'Too Much Too Young' from the debut LP. The other four songs on the EP were all cover versions of reggae stompers much favoured in the original skinhead era of the late Sixties – 'Guns Of Navarone', 'Long Shot Kick De Bucket', 'Liquidator' and 'Skinhead Moonstomp'. Live EPs had rarely done well in the UK charts, but 'Too Much Too Young' raced to the top, giving the band their first Number 1. 1980 continued to be a successful year for the band, with further hits in 'Rat Race' (Number 5), 'Stereotype' (Number 6) and 'Do Nothing' (Number 4).

The group also negotiated the traditionally thorny problem of a second LP with *More Specials*, an album in a more relaxed vein than its predecessor. Recorded in Coventry and produced by Jerry Dammers and Dave Jordan, the album featured the usual supporting cast plus guests Kix Thompson from Madness on sax and vocalist Rhoda Dakar – from yet another 2-Tone signing, the Bodysnatchers – who was featured on 'Pearl's Cafe'. *More Specials* received mixed reviews but managed, nevertheless, to reach Number 5 in the UK album charts.

1981 provided the Specials with their finest moment. While riots raged in Liverpool and Manchester that summer, the new Specials single, 'Ghost Town', was a

record companies. Both aims were admirably fulfilled. 'Gangsters' reached Number 6 in the UK singles charts at the end of July and enthusiastic record labels started bidding for the right to distribute 2-Tone. The group eventually signed a deal with Chrysalis which promised them complete freedom from interference in both the artistic and commercial fields.

The Selecter and Madness were soon releasing singles on the new label, and along with the Specials, these two groups played a 40-date tour of the UK in the autumn of the same year and all three appeared on the same edition of BBC-TV's 'Top Of The Pops' in November.

Their first LP, released at the end of 1979, was called *Specials* – the group had now dropped the 'AKA' tag. Elvis Costello had been another of the group's early converts, and he offered his services as producer. It was a strong set, mixing songs with a strong social content – 'Stupid Marriage' and 'Concrete Jungle' – with thoroughgoing rave-ups in 'Do The Dog' and 'Nite Club'. It also provided the band with a second Top Ten hit with the skanking 'A Message To You Rudy', released as a single in October 1979. Rico and Dick Cuthell played horns on the album.

Far left: Lynval Golding (left), Terry Hall (centre) and Neville Staples left the Specials in 1981 to form the Fun Boy Three. Below: The Fun Boy Three on stage shortly before their split in 1983. Left: The regrouped Special AKA pose for the cover of their 1983 single 'Bright Lights'/'Racist Friend'.

chilling view of the deeper problems behind the troubles, set to an eerily relaxed rhythm and memorable melody. Its topical theme seems to have struck a chord; the single soared to Number 1.

But, at the height of their success, the Specials were falling apart. Close observers of the group had always been aware that acrimonious dissent was never far from the surface. The most consistent reason given was Dammers' authoritarian control of the band; he was almost single-handedly responsible for their success in songwriting terms.

On the Specials' return to the UK in October 1981, Terry Hall, Lynval Golding and Neville Staples announced their departure from the group and the formation of the Fun Boy Three. A short time after this, Roddy Radiation decided to leave to form a rockabilly outfit called the Tear-jerkers. The final blow to what remained of the original line-up came when bassist Horace Gentleman, who had joined the religious sect Exegesis, fell out with Dammers and left.

While Jerry Dammers and Brad attempted to put the pieces of a new band together, the Fun Boy Three were off and running with a debut single less than a month after their departure from the Specials. Entitled 'The Lunatics Have Taken Over The Asylum', its doom-laden rhythms belied the group's name, but nevertheless gave them a UK hit single at Number 20. Television appearances showed that the trio had abandoned all traces of their former band's wild antics.

Early in 1982, Terry Hall spotted an all-female trio called Bananarama, and in the spring the two trios combined to produce a Number 2 hit single with their version of the Thirties standard 'It Ain't What You Do It's The Way That You Do It'.

Worth waiting for

The connection was continued when the Fun Boy Three contributed backing vocals to Bananarama's hit single 'Really Saying Something'. Their debut album, *The Fun Boy Three* (1982), also had vocal backing from Bananarama and instrumental help from the Swinging Laurels; the single 'The Telephone Always Rings' reached Number 17, while their version of Gershwin's 'Summertime' made Number 18.

But the group suffered a serious setback when Lynval Golding was viciously attacked with a broken bottle at a Coventry night-club; this nearly cost him his sight and caused the cancellation of the group's first UK tour. Furthermore, the Fun Boy Three's last single of the year, 'The More I See (The Less I Believe)', which addressed itself to the problems in Northern Ireland, failed to become a hit after receiving minimal radio airplay.

The release of *Waiting*, the Fun Boy Three's second LP, dispelled any doubts about the group's future: the eight months spent writing material for the LP were seen to have been worth it. Produced by Talking Head David Byrne and with arrangements by ex-Ravishing Beauty Nicky Holland, *Waiting* offered a series of strong songs convincingly played in a wide variety of styles, from uptempo tracks like 'We're Having All The Fun' to reflective pieces such as 'Things We Do'. The LP also gave the group a Number 10 hit single in 'Tunnel Of Love'.

The Fun Boy Three seemed set for great things; their first tour of the UK had been successfully completed, their most convincing single release, 'Our Lips Are Sealed', was riding high in the charts at Number 7 and an inaugural tour of the US was under way. But on their return from America in July, the group suddenly split up, with Terry Hall planning a solo career.

By any other name . . .

Meanwhile Dammers and Bradbury had reverted to their original name of the Special AKA, and had rebuilt the group. Three vocalists were involved: Rhoda Dakar, who had previously recorded and gigged with the Specials; Stan Campbell, another Coventry native who had been with a late incarnation of the Selecter, and Egidio Newton, a session vocalist and one-time member of Animal Nightlife. Gary 'Roobish' McManus and John Shipley were recruited to play bass and guitar.

The new line-up first appeared on vinyl backing Rhoda Dakar on her harrowing and powerful anti-rape polemic 'The Boiler' (1982). The record proved too strong for radio play, and consequently the single only struggled into the lower reaches of the chart. The next release showed that Dammers was in no way disconcerted by the lack of public response. Entitled 'War Crimes', it was a damning indictment of the Israeli involvement in the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; set to an uncompromising musical backing, it went the way of its predecessor in commercial terms. A third single, the double A-side 'Bright Lights'/'Racist Friend' (1983), only served to confirm once again that the Special AKA would settle for nothing less than acceptance on their own terms. It too failed to succeed in the singles chart.

By late 1983, Dammers and the group had nearly completed the first Special AKA album, which had taken a long time and a lot of money to produce. Regardless of pop fashions, it seemed that Jerry Dammers and his band would continue to confront contemporary problems in what they considered the most appropriate musical setting.

PETER CLARK

The Specials
Recommended Listening

Specials (2-Tone CDL TT 5001) (Includes: Concrete Jungle, Little Bitch, Too Much Too Young, Do The Dog, A Message To You Rudy, Monkey Man).

Fun Boy Three
Recommended Listening

The Fun Boy Three (Chrysalis CHR 1383) (Includes: Sanctuary, The Lunatics Have Taken Over The Asylum, It Ain't What You Do It's The Way That You Do It, Way On Down, I Don't Believe It, Best Of Luck Mate).

THE BIRMINGHAM BEAT

Pop, ska and reggae from the Go-Feet crew

WHEN A BIRMINGHAM band called – with characteristic simplicity – the Beat made Number 6 in the UK charts with their debut single 'Tears Of A Clown' in January 1980, they registered the fifth consecutive Top Twenty hit for the new 2-Tone label. The cheerful, energetic sound of this first single set the Beat apart from the mainstream of the 2-Tone movement, and conveyed an enthusiasm that, while it lasted, established the band as one of the brightest hopes of the post-punk music scene.

The Beat certainly stood out from the dour 2-Tone stereotype presented by the Specials and the Selecter. Their two fresh-faced frontmen, the blond Dave Wakeling and rasta-turned-punk Ranking Roger and their dancing 'Beat Girl' logo reflected a romantic side that gave them more teen-pop appeal than their 2-Tone contemporaries. The logo was devised by local artist Hunt Emerson, whose distinctive artwork adorned most of the Beat's record sleeves.

Brum boys

Although closely associated with their Birmingham base, the Beat initially came together in the Isle of Wight, where Midlanders Dave Wakeling (born 19 February 1956) and guitarist Andy Cox (born 25 January 1956) were working in 1978 making solar panels. They met local bassist David Steele (born 8 September 1960) and, encouraged by their collective songwriting prowess, returned to Birmingham to recruit a drummer. Everett Morton (born 5 April 1951), a West Indian who had more experience – including a spell with one of Joan Armatrading's early bands – than the other three put together, took time to adapt to their punky inclinations, but proved to be a real find.

February 1979 saw the four-piece Beat play their first gigs, and acquire the services of Ranking Roger (born 21 February 1961), a black punk with dyed orange hair who drummed with a local band, the Dum Dum Boys. His extrovert character won him a frontman's role alongside Wakeling. The band's line-up was completed by the near-legendary Jamaican saxophone-player Saxa (born around 1931); while many 2-Tone bands were playing Prince Buster covers, few could claim to include one of his former sidemen in their line-up.

The Selecter offered the Beat a chance to break out of the Birmingham pubs by booking them for support gigs. They went into the studio at the end of 1979 to record a single on the 2-Tone label. The choice was the Miracles' Motown classic 'Tears Of A Clown' with Wakeling on main vocals, backed by a breakneck original, 'Rankin' Full Stop', featuring the eponymous Roger.

Like Madness, who signed a lucrative deal with Stiff after a 2-Tone hit single, the Beat stopped to assess their options after their first chart success. They decided to set up their own custom label, Go-Feet, which was distributed through Arista, and released 'Hands Off . . . She's Mine'/'Twist And Crawl' in February 1980. 'Hands Off', a tongue-in-cheek poke at male chauvinism reached Number 9 in the charts. Perhaps the best single of this early period, however, completed a Top Ten hat-trick in April; combining 'Mirror In The Bathroom' with a cover of the Pioneers' bouncy 'Jackpot', it made Number 4.

Above left: The Beat's unlikely appearance belied the bright, energetic dance music they purveyed. Above: The band's 'Beat Girl' logo provided a light-hearted contrast to the 2-Tone trademark.

The Beat goes on

The Beat's first album, fittingly entitled *I Just Can't Stop It*, was also released in April and turned out to be one of the best party records of the period; almost unremittingly uptempo, it set a punishing pace – one American dance company complained that it was 'too fast to dance to'. Of the tracks on the LP, 'Two Swords' presented a rational yet danceable argument for pacifism, while 'Stand Down Margaret' flung Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's words back in her face: 'I see no joy, I see only sorrow/I see no chance of your bright new tomorrow'. Released as a double A-sided single with 'Best Friend', it was a Number 22 hit, with royalties of some £15,000 being donated to the Anti Nuclear Campaign.

The LP was characterised by the urgent, chattering guitar interplay between Wakeling and Cox. Wakeling's upside-down guitar (a stance mistakenly copied

from the left-handed Paul McCartney) made his downstroke Cox's upstroke, creating a pop propulsion which was emphasised by Everett Morton's reggae rhythms. Above all this floated Saxa's ethereal, echo-laden saxophone improvisations. These had become the Beat's trademark and featured strongly on December's chart entry, 'Too Nice To Talk To', which reached Number 7.

Meet the Beat

The simmering rhythms that had made the first album such a delight, however, had settled into a reggae pulse by the time of 1981's *Wha'appen*, at the expense of the original excitement. Reggae singer Cedric Myton of the Congos (a reissue of whose exquisitely laid-back *Heart Of The Congos* album in 1981 was one of the few non-Beat recordings to surface on Go-Feet) lent vocal support. The most successful tracks were the loping lovers' rock of 'Doors To Your Heart' (a Number 33 hit single), and the anti-war song 'I Am Your Flag'.

The recognition that *Wha'appen* was a musical cul-de-sac was followed in April 1982 by Saxa's retirement from live work for health reasons. The loss of such a charismatic figure was minimised, in musical terms at least, by the recruitment of Wesley Magoogan, a seasoned session man who had made his name with Hazel O'Connor. In the interim, another single, 'Hit It', had been released, but flopped when radio programmers discovered its risqué subject matter, masturbation.

On the face of it, the Beat's third LP, *Special Beat Service* (1982), was ideal for the American market. Devoid of political sloganeering, yet full of classic pop songs with strong hooks, the album – backed by constant touring – was a great success. Yet British Beat fans found it hard to relate to keyboards – played by roadie Dave Blockhead – taking the place of the chiming rhythm guitars on 'I Confess' or the sudden appearance of an accordion on 'Jeanette'.

Their lengthy US tours, however, lost the Beat much of their status in the UK. Arista, who had signed the band for the UK only, could see their returns diminishing still further, and dropped them. As a final gesture, the label released the Beat's idiosyncratic cover of Andy Willians' 'Can't Get Used To Losing You' (a track from the first album), as a single, which became a surprise Number 3 hit. But after two appearances supporting David Bowie at Milton Keynes Bowl in July 1983, Ranking Roger and Dave Wakeling left to form a new group, General Public.

Remember them this way

Perhaps the Beat's innocent enthusiasm took too many knocks in the cut-and-thrust world of rock; certainly they found the British public unwilling or unable to come to terms with their changes in musical direction. Yet they will be remembered for the ability they shared with the Jam, to put over political and social comment in a direct, unpretentious and danceable way.

MICHAEL HEATLEY

The Beat
Recommended Listening

I Just Can't Stop It (Go-Feet BEAT 1) (Includes: Mirror In The Bathroom, Jackpot, Best Friend, Big Shot, Two Swords, Whine And Grine/Stand Down Margaret); *What Is Beat?* (Go-Feet BEAT 6) (Includes: Tears Of A Clown, Hands Off . . . She's Mine, Mirror In The Bathroom, Too Nice To Talk To, Can't Get Used To Losing You, Best Friend).

Below: Meet the Beat, from left Andy Cox, David Steele, Everett Morton and Ranking Roger, with Dave Wakeling and Saxa in the foreground.

How Madness took giant strides to stardom

FEW BANDS THAT had started out at the height of punk in 1976-77 were still around making hit records six years later. One group that did manage to stay the course was Madness, whose good-time dance music survived the changes in musical fashions with an uncanny ability to produce Top Ten hits one after the other.

The Camden invasion

Madness' stomping ground was the Camden Town area of London. All seven members were brought up around there, working-class boys whose lives had been hard at times, nothing more than ordinary at others.

In late 1976, the North London Invaders were formed by 18-year-old Mike Barson and 17-year-old Lee Thompson. Having stolen a Fats Domino LP from a second-hand record shop, they enjoyed endless sessions of playing along to the coveted album: Lee played an old, tinny sax, a 21-year-old friend, Chris Foreman, played drums *and* guitar and Mike, the only one who had any idea of how to string two chords together, played piano.

In June 1977 the North London Invaders engaged another drummer, Gary Dovey, and a bass player, Chas Smash; hour after hour was spent in Mike Barson's bedroom as he tried, with little success, to instil some sort of musical sensitivity into the band. Smash left after a row with Barson and Dovey quit after a punch-up with Thompson, but not before introducing 16-year-old Mark 'Bedders' Bedford to the band: despite his age, Bedders was a highly competent bassist.

The next individual to try to fill the drum vacancy was John Hasler, but he soon gave that up to become the band's manager and was replaced by an old friend of Bedders, Dan 'Woody' Woodgate. Then Barson overheard a young Graham 'Suggs'

McPherson singing on a bus and asked him to join the group as vocalist.

In 1978 the Invaders played their first gig at Acklam Hall, London, supporting reggae band Tribesman. They performed a few of Mike Barson's own songs and realised that they had created a new kind of sound. It was a sound born of endless hours listening to old Sixties Motown records and Jamaican bluebeat, together with a touch of lyrical silliness often attributed to the influence of Kilburn and the High Roads. That night they christened their music the 'Nutty Sound' and Chas Smash, in the audience, assured his place as second vocalist and chief 'nutty' dancer by leaping on stage and dancing frenetically, his head jerking from side to side as fast as his feet.

After a brief spell as Morris and the Minors, the band became Madness after a favourite Prince Buster song; but amid the doom and gloom of the post-punk music scene, there was little room on the pub circuit for a happy-go-lucky, good-time dance band, however exclusive their sound. According to Suggs, 'We were playing reggae and bluebeat, which was like old fogeys' music and everyone else was blasting out punk. But we kept on going because that was what we were into.' It wasn't just the music and the dance that made Madness unique, though: the Nutty Boys had by this time formed a visual image to reflect the sound – this consisted of short, flat-topped haircuts and identical mohair/zoot suits, or pork pie hats, baggy blue jeans, Fred Perry T-shirts and Harrington jackets.

Double date

In early 1979 Madness got their big break. In Coventry, Jerry Dammers had also rediscovered ska and bluebeat and formed a band of 'rude boys' called the Specials. Dammers had created his own label, 2-Tone, and released 'Gangsters', a single that was taking the country by storm. Madness introduced themselves to

Below: Madness put their best feet forward, from left Mike Barson, Suggs McPherson, Woody Woodgate, Chris Foreman, Chas Smash, Mark Bedford and Lee Thompson.

Dammers and were immediately asked to support his band at London's Nashville, the same night as Camden Town's Dublin Castle had finally relented and given them a gig. They played both dates.

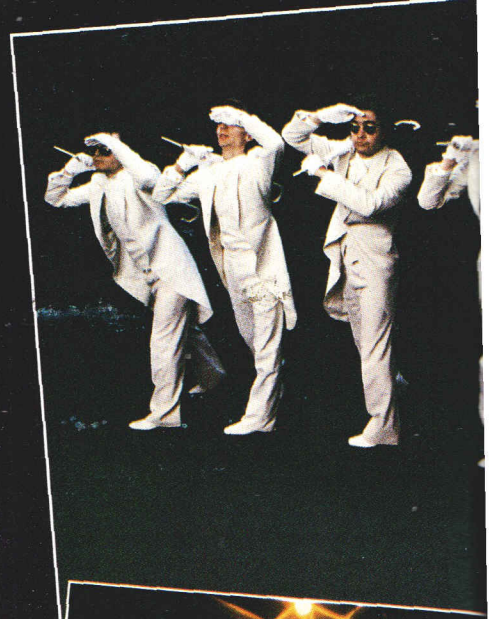
In August 1979, Madness' debut single was released on 2-Tone. Entitled 'The Prince' (after Prince Buster), it stayed in the charts for 11 weeks, reaching Number 16 in October. Although indebted to Dammers and 2-Tone, Madness were nevertheless reluctant to be judged as part of the label and secondary to the Specials.

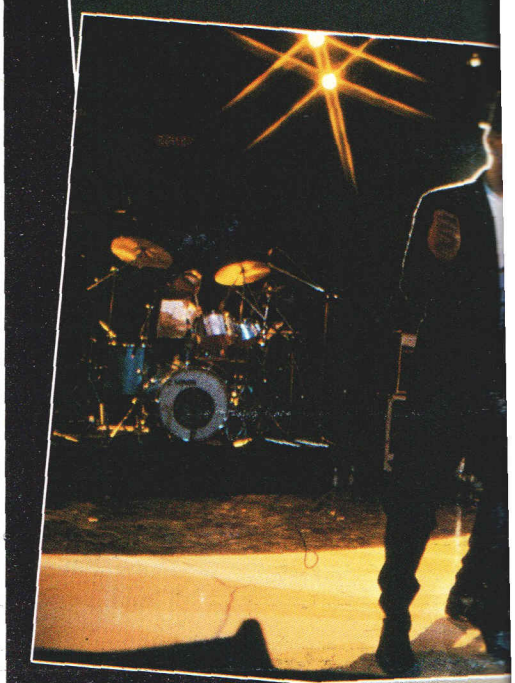
In October 1979 they were asked to play at the wedding reception of Dave Robinson, head of the independent Stiff label. By the end of October, they had signed to Stiff and released a second single and a debut album, both entitled 'One Step Beyond'. The single stayed in the charts for over three months, reaching the Number 7 position, while the album, produced by Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley, reached Number 2 and stayed in the Top 75 for 78 weeks altogether. The LP's cover displayed the Madness 'train' – a combination of the nutty dance and a moving train image. Their trademark for years to come, it was even recreated by the group for a television toothpaste commercial in 1982.

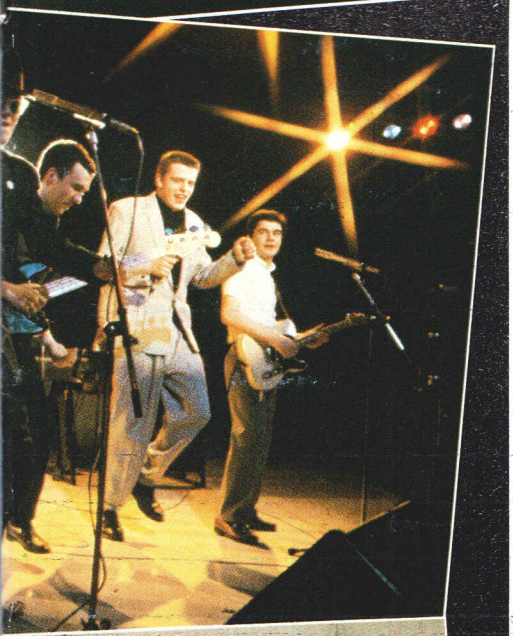
Matinée idols

At the beginning of November, Madness agreed to take part in the British 2-Tone tour, along with the Specials, the Selecter and the Bodysnatchers. The tour was an overwhelming financial success but provided the background to a potentially damaging situation. The Madness look and ska sound had attracted elements of Britain's skinhead movement and Madness, the only all-white group on the tour, became targets for National Front and British Movement offensives. The success of 'My Girl', which reached Number 2 in January 1980, was marred by a band of BM followers who insisted on 'seig heiling' and fighting at every gig – ideal fodder for a predatory press. Unable to cope with the situation, Madness quit the 2-Tone tour and left for the United States, issuing a statement to the press which insisted that 'there's no way any of us are fascist – we're categorically against it'.

Below: The Madness 'train' steams into action. Above right: Suitable attire for the 'Tomorrow's Just Anther Day' video. Right: On stage in Paris. Below right: Suggs plays video villain in 'Shut Up'. Bottom right: The Camden invasion?







While no permanent damage had been done, Madness decided to play down the skinhead image and actively encourage their increasing younger audience. In February 1980 they played an unprecedented matinée gig in London, with entrance restricted to children of 16 and under. The gig sold out and marked the beginning of a trend for pop bands to follow. But the event that really ensured continuing success happened in September that year when, after the Top Ten hit 'Night Boat To Cairo', the archetypal Madness anthem was released.

Nutty tricks

'Baggy Trousers' epitomised the Madness sound *and* look with its cheeky schoolboy lyrics, fast, staccato rhythm, ska sax breaks and, even more important, its promotional video. Directed by Dave Robinson, the video's *pièce de resistance* was an airborne, sax-playing Lee Thompson, sporting a pair of ludicrously baggy trousers. There was no doubt that this helped push the record up to Number 3 in October 1980 and keep it in the charts for four months. There followed a series of promotional videos that were as important to Madness as the songs. The band's acting abilities, along with crazy themes, trick photography and no sartorial inhibitions whatsoever, gave them a video identity that was to remain unrivalled for many years.

The end of 1980 saw the release of a second album, *Absolutely*, a follow-up single, 'Embarrassment', more matinées and a sell-out charity show – all of which showed Madness retaining a friendly, carefree image. In 1981, after yet another Top Ten hit, 'The Return Of The Los Palmas 7', Dave Robinson decided to capitalise on their video success – only this time it was to be a major feature film about the first three years of the band's life (ending with the first Dublin Castle gig). The film starred Madness as themselves, featured their songs and was entitled, after one of the *Absolutely* tracks, *Take It Or Leave It*. Despite its success as an extended Madness video, a witty storyline and a fast city pace, the film flopped at the box office in October 1981; critics complained that out-of-tune rehearsals in a back bedroom did not constitute great cinema, others that the majority of Madness fans were so young that they had little interest in the band's early days.

Despite their failure to make it on celluloid, the band continued to churn out hit singles and sell out gigs just as they had always done. In April 1981 'Grey Day' reached Number 4; this weary, rather miserable song reflected a marked departure from the characteristic chummy cheerfulness, and its cynicism was echoed in the third album, *Seven*. Released in October, the album proved the band had not only improved musically beyond belief but that they were also beginning to write politically sensitive and even controversial lyrics.

In the autumn of 1981, 'Shut Up' and a cover version of Labi Siffre's hit 'It Must Be Love' both made the UK Top Ten, while the following February saw the release of 'Cardiac Arrest'. A comment on the stresses of modern-day living, the single was banned by the BBC because one of their DJ's fathers had died recently of a heart attack. The ban was eventually lifted, but had guaranteed a break in the run of Top Ten hits – the single peaked at Number 14.

In May 1982, however, 'House Of Fun' gave Madness their first Number 1. This coincided with a Number 1 album, the compilation *Complete Madness*, described by one national paper as an 'essential LP for people who wouldn't normally buy records' – and, since the videos were almost as popular as the records, Stiff also released a *Complete Madness* video cassette.

Unlike many of their contemporaries, Madness rose above their own fame and fortune and actually changed very little. Determined to keep the original 'nuttiness' intact, they remained in Camden Town and their music, although more proficient, was still exemplified by titles like 'Driving In My Car', a Number 4 hit released in July 1982, and 'Our House' (an ordinary semi-detached in an ordinary street) in November. The latter became the band's second UK Number 1 hit and a US hit and was taken from their album *The Rise And Fall*, released in 1982.

The train kept a-rollin'

By 1983 Madness had established themselves as one of the widest-reaching successes of the time. They had stowed the baggy trousers and Crombie overcoats in favour of a more casual, less uniform look (Chas Smash, the original skinhead, even sported a beard) and, while their songs undoubtedly retained the dance-hall 'nutty' element, they became unafraid to express political sentiment: in April they joined UB40 in a benefit gig against the Sizewell B nuclear reactor site, and headlined a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament rally at Brockwell Park, South London, in May.

By now, the British music press, which once had seen Madness as nothing more than a temporary respite for youngsters in a sea of punk gloom, had come to recognise the merits of the band and treated them with affection. The pop world had turned full circle; tired of hearing about the recession, people wanted to dance, go to clubs, and enjoy pop music. Madness' survival was assured both by this trend and their own attitude; as Suggs put it in 1983, 'Madness is going to keep on going. It's like a train. It's unstoppable now.' SALLY PAYNE

Madness
Recommended Listening

Complete Madness (Stiff HIT-TV 1) (Includes: Embarrassment, Baggy Trousers, It Must Be Love, Night Boat To Cairo, House Of Fun, One Step Beyond); *The Rise And Fall* (Stiff SEEZ 46) (Includes: Rise And Fall, Tomorrow's (Just Another Day), Sunday Morning, Our House, New Delhi, Calling Card).

Signing Off

UB40: dole-queue reggae with a message

OF THE PLETHORA of energetic dance bands to emerge from the Midlands during the post-punk, 2-Tone era, only Dexys Midnight Runners and UB40 stayed the course. Of the two, UB40, with their political commitment and anonymous image, seemed the less likely to wear the mantle of pop stardom. But talent will out, and UB40 managed to sidestep the dictates of fashion and eventually achieve considerable commercial success.

Graduation day

The UB40 paradox began in late 1977 when three fellow students at Moseley Art College, Brian Travers, Jim Brown and Earl Falconer, got together with a bunch of like-minded friends and – like so many others at the time – decided that a lack of musical ability would be no deterrent to forming a band. Almost randomly, Travers decided to take up the saxophone, Brown opted for drums and Falconer the bass guitar. They were subsequently joined by their friends Ali and Robin Campbell (who chose, respectively, rhythm and lead guitar), Jimmy Lynn (keyboards), Norman Hassan (percussion) and Timi Tupe 'Yomi' Abeyomi Babyemi (percussion). Although they initially lacked instrumental ability, there was a strong musical sensibility in the band generated by the Campbell brothers, sons of British folk-singer Iain Campbell.

It took six months of fairly solid rehearsal before UB40 felt confident enough to perform publicly at the Horse and Hounds public house in King's Heath; at that time their repertoire was composed entirely of cover versions of reggae classics, like Augustus Clarke's 'Big And Small' and Bim Sherman's 'Lover's Leap'. By playing the Jamaican-based music that they loved and vaunting a percussion-heavy line-up, the group appealed strongly to the multi-racial, dance-crazy audiences of the moment. However, even before they had garnered a decent local following, UB40 underwent a personnel shuffle when the British immigration authorities decided that they wanted to send 'Yomi' back to his native Nigeria; at the same time, Jimmy Lynn was replaced by the brother of Ali Campbell's girlfriend, the admirably-named Mickey Virtue.

The name UB40 was taken from the identity card issued to recipients of unemployment benefit, and as such reflected the band's commitment to social issues – a commitment that, while unwavering, was often misinterpreted. They have undertaken loss-making tours of African countries – like Zimbabwe – that rarely see multi-racial bands, they have performed at fund-raising gigs for anarchist organisations such as the Autonomy Club, yet have publicly decried the much better-known Rock Against Racism organisation. 'RAR seems to dodge a lot of important issues,' said Jim Brown in 1980, while Ali Campbell added '. . . the world seems to be in the middle of a wild plunge into right-wing madness. The people that we're against are violent and you can't fight them off with words. I think that's why RAR became such a nonentity.'

Items on toast

Eschewing popular causes was typical of UB40's collective morality and their staunch belief in it. Right from the start, they avoided the temptations of major record companies who were holding out 'custom label' deals to the new ska/reggae bands, like the Beat, who were assigned the Go-Feet label by Arista. Instead they signed to David Virr's Dudley-based Graduate Records for a straight 50-50 royalty split, but the consequent lack of an advance threw them into debt when they discovered that escalating popularity meant they had to buy bigger and better equipment.

Just before signing with Graduate, UB40 were joined by Astro (real name Terence Wilson), who had been running his own reggae disco show around the Birmingham clubs where the group often played. Astro fulfilled the role of frontman, or 'toaster', in much the same way as Ranking Roger of the Beat or Chas Smash of Madness, but later went on to become a far more important part of the band's musical mosaic by learning to play trumpet and forming one third of the UB40 brass section with Travers and Hassan.

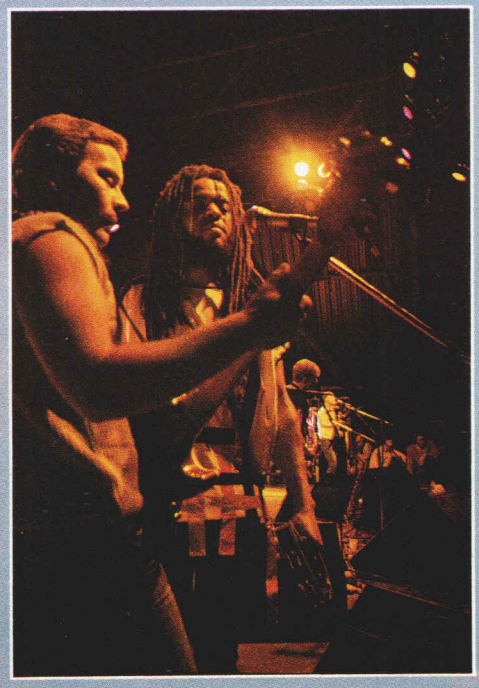
Although Astro was always the most visible member of UB40 on stage, the band practiced a fierce democracy in every other respect, sharing writing credits and royalties, refusing to appoint a single spokesman and insisting instead that the music spoke for them. Thus they became one of the most anonymous of contemporary pop bands – indeed their first three Graduate singles, together with the majority of their albums, did not carry a picture of the group on their cover.

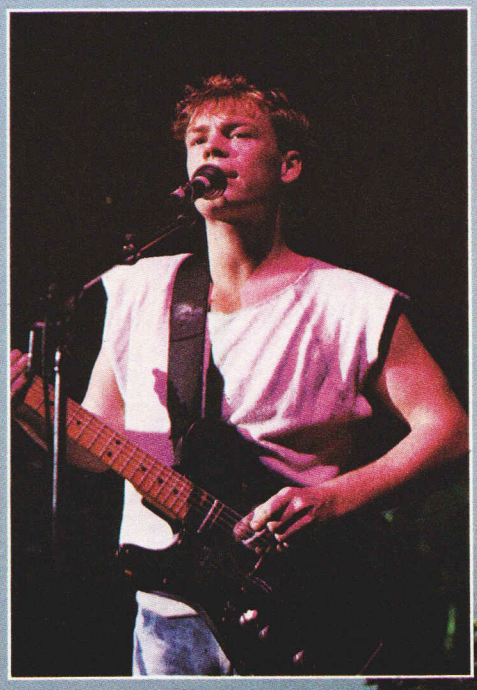
In keeping with their provincial independence, the band used a local producer, Bob Lamb, an ex-member of Birmingham

reggae band Locomotive (who had had a UK Top Thirty hit in 1968 with 'Rudi's In Love'). Lamb's home-built studio was so small that he could only accommodate the band by recording them in shifts – but the results were highly impressive.

In 1979, the Pretenders surprised the music business by inviting UB40 to join them on their first major UK tour and, helped by this exposure, UB40's single, 'King'/'Food For Thought', entered the Top Twenty the following March and climbed to Number 4. A follow-up single, 'My Way Of Thinking', went to Number 6 in June,

Bottom: UB40; standing from left Astro, Brian Travers, Robin Campbell, Norman Hassan, and Jim Brown; sitting from left Mickey Virtue, Earl Falconer and Ali Campbell. Below: Ali Campbell at the microphone. Below left: Robin Campbell and Astro deliver the goods.





while their debut album, *Signing Off*, reached Number 2 in September and stayed on the LP charts for a staggering 71 weeks, achieving the highest sales to date of any independent LP. In November, they notched up another Top Ten single with 'The Earth Dies Screaming'.

Labour of love

In 1981, the band decided they needed even more control of their records and left Graduate and started their own label, DEP International. They found continuing success with this new venture: the first DEP single, 'Don't Let It Pass You By', reached Number 16, while the second, 'One In Ten', made Number 7, despite the rather gloomy nature of its lyric. A new album, *Present Arms*, reached Number 2 in the LP charts in the summer, while in September the band took the bold step of releasing a dub version of the record; *Present Arms In Dub* underlined UB40's commitment to roots music and, despite its parochial appeal, made the LP Top Forty.

By the end of 1981, however, the public's appetite for Anglicised reggae and ska was wearing thin, the Selecter and the Specials had broken up and UB40's next three singles barely dented the Top Thirty. The following year found the band moving discreetly away from their fairly strict reggae posture, harnessing more melodic tunes and romantic lyrics to a softer beat. 'People always assume reggae is just JA reggae,' explained Earl Falconer at the time. 'The thing is, people's education is vastly different here to what it is in Jamaica. We get accused of playing lightweight, watered-down reggae, but it's not really our fault. Our musical education has been in Britain, listening to the radio and that's where you work from.'

In 1983, however, there was a pronounced UB40 revival, doubtless a result of the band's musical maturity. They finally reached a Number 1 single with the lilting, hugely catchy 'Red Red Wine' – a cover of the old Neil Diamond song first played reggae-style by Tony Tribe – and topped the album charts with *Labour Of Love*, a collection of cover versions of early-Seventies reggae songs that paid tribute to their influences. Finally the years of operating in their own, uncompromising fashion had paid off: UB40 had established themselves unequivocally as a musical co-operative of enduring quality. As Jim Brown said back in 1980: 'Some people will say that, first and foremost, we're a dance band, but I really think we've got a responsibility which overrides being a dance band. A dance band is a package to sell your politics.'

MARK WILLIAMS

UB40
Recommended Listening

The Singles Album (Graduate GRADSLP 3) (Includes: Food For Thought, Tyler, Adella, My Way Of Thinking, Little By Little, The Earth Dies Screaming); *Labour Of Love* (DEP International DEP 5) (Includes: Cherry Oh Baby, Please Don't Make Me Cry, Johnny Too Bad, Many Rivers To Cross, Red Red Wine, Version Girl).

REGGAE UK

Black sounds from Britain's inner cities

FOR THE BLACK community in the UK in the Fifties, the 'house blues' party was the mainstay of the weekend's entertainment – a cultural refuge in the midst of an often hostile host community. Everyone came together – Jamaican, Trinidadian, St Lucian – and rocked their troubles away to the sounds of Fats Domino, Bobby 'Blue' Bland, Johnny Ace or Amos Milburn. Rhythm and blues was the staple musical diet of the first sound-system operators like Duke Vin or Count Suckle, but as the Sixties approached, the new music of Jamaica became the dominant musical force.

The ascendancy of the ska beat coincided with Jamaica's independence in 1962, and up-and-coming young acts like Jimmy Cliff and Toots and the Maytals proved stiff competition for the old-established blues and boogie singers like Laurel Aitken. Aitken decided to emigrate to England, and soon established himself as the house producer of the Blue Beat label. The first generation of JA/UK session players followed, including veteran trombonist Rico Rodriguez, who had left the Skatalites and decided to make England his home, along with saxophonist Joe Harriot and others.

Musical monopoly

Ska merged into rocksteady and rocksteady into reggae. The music press was unanimous in their declaration that reggae, a music associated in the UK with the skinhead cult, was cheap and inferior compared with soul. Despite such critical disdain, a Methodist youth club in the North London suburb of Harlesden saw the birth of the Cimarons in 1967. At that time the only black bands working the UK live circuit were both soul bands, Jimmy James and the Vagabonds and Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band. With the reggae market to themselves, the Cimarons set about backing virtually every Jamaican singer to tour or record in the UK between 1968 and 1972.

A visit to Africa by the group in the midst of the Nigerian civil war led to a radical shift in consciousness. By 1974, the Cimarons were overtly Rastafarian in outlook, had recorded their *On The Rocks* album in Jamaica and topped the charts there for seven consecutive weeks with their version of Bob Marley's 'Talking Blues'. The mid Seventies was a critical period for the Cimarons, who headed a new wave of young roots reggae musicians whose enthusiasm for live performance signalled an alternative to the sound-system circuit.

In Jamaica in 1976, reggae was a melting-pot of radical politics and apocalyptic Rastafarian imagery set to a militant rockers beat. Its main ambassador, Bob Marley, was conquering the world with his *Natty Dread* album and a stage show unprecedented in reggae; the Wailers were as tight and heavy on stage as in the studio, and were a serious inspiration to any aspiring young musician who saw them. Record companies were falling over themselves to sign reggae artists and the music press was littered with features from Jamaica.

It was the summer of 1976 that was to prove most critical. Punk made the headlines, and the adoption of reggae by bands such as the Clash and the Slits saw punk and reggae bands come together in unity. Rock Against Racism was instrumental in opening up a vast new audience for UK reggae clubs and pubs.

In the depths of London's Ladbroke Grove, the Metro Youth Club was the local hub of activity. One regular was a young bass player, George Oban, who had returned after a spell in Jamaica with the intention of forming a band. Together with Brinsley Forde, he recruited 15-year-old drummer Angus Gaye from the Metronome Steel Band, guitarist Donald Griffiths and Courtney Hemmings on keyboards. Their first album, *Aswad*, was released in 1976 to critical acclaim, yet they were confronted with a consistently hostile audience on their first major tour as support for pub-rockers turned punks Eddie and the Hot Rods. But the climate was changing with the help of Don Letts, the DJ at London's premier punk venue, the Roxy where punk and reggae enjoyed a close and fruitful relationship.

Aswad recorded with and backed Jamaican legend Burning Spear on his first UK tour in 1977, yet despite extensive touring in their own right and appearances at the numerous Rock Against Racism concerts, their recorded output was erratic. Frustration led to a clash over musical direction and George Oban was dropped from the band. Brinsley's acting and Aswad's musical role in the film *Babylon* (1980) further enhanced their reputation.

Misty in Roots came together in Southall, West London, where they formed their own People Unite collective. Their hypnotic songs of redemption owned more to Burning Spear than Bob Marley, and they were arguably the most uncompromising and least commercial of all the youth bands. BBC Radio One DJ John Peel voted their *Live At The Counter Eurovision '79* his album of the year. Another London band to break through in the late Seventies were Black Slate, who scored a UK Number 9 hit in 1980 with the catchy 'Amigo'. Although they failed to score further pop successes on this scale, their musicians featured on many other notable UK productions.

Steel Pulse brought theatrics, compelling harmonies and razor-edged lyrics from Birmingham to London's Vortex and Hope and Anchor in 1977. Their wide exposure to white audiences on the circuit undoubtedly helped push their first album, 1978's *Handsworth Revolution*, to Number 9 in the album charts. After the sacking of lead singer Michael Riley, however, the group began to pursue a commitment to Rastafari and moved away from the more immediate issues of the day – a move that hit sales of the excellent *Tribute To The Martyrs* (1979) and subsequent albums. Two Bristol bands, Black Roots and Talisman, were also prominent on the gig circuit.

For lovers only

The other side of the UK reggae coin was lovers' rock. Sound systems still provided the main sources of musical entertainment in the black community, and lovers' rock was strictly studio music made for the party or the dancehall. The first lovers' rock tune was 'Caught You In A Lie', sung by Louisa Mark, played by Matumbi and produced by sound system operator Lloyd Coxsone in 1979.

Key roles in the development of this softer side of the music were played by Matumbi and, in particular, their guitarist Dennis Bovell. Formed in 1971, Matumbi pioneered that mellow fusion of soul and reggae which characterised the lovers' rock genre. By the late Seventies, producers like Castro Brown, Winston Edwards and Bovell had launched numerous sweet, sugary girl vocal groups. Although artists like Jean Adebambo and Carrol Thompson remained cult names, one-off pop successes like Janet Kay's 'Silly Games' (a Number 2 pop hit in 1979) or Sugar Minott's 'Good Thing Going' (a Number 4 in 1981) proved the size of lovers' rock's potential audience.

The lack of direction that was reflected in early Eighties pop music generally was equally evident among the ranks of UK reggae performers. Even the once-proud Cimarons had been reduced to recording an album of Paul McCartney's pop hits in reggae style in a bid for chart success. Yet in artists like Aswad, Dennis Bovell and dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, there was clearly no lack of talent to provide British listeners with an alternative to the JA reggae scene.

PAUL BRADSHAW

Top right: Aswad, the young lions of UK reggae, prowl their Ladbroke Grove neighbourhood. Far right: The seven-piece Steel Pulse line-up that cut 1978's Handsworth Revolution *album. Above right: Pulse in rehearsal. Right: The pioneering Cimarons on stage during their Rasta-influenced Seventies phase.*

THE
FIRI

TOM THOMPSON

Keeping up the pace with Dexys Midnight Runners

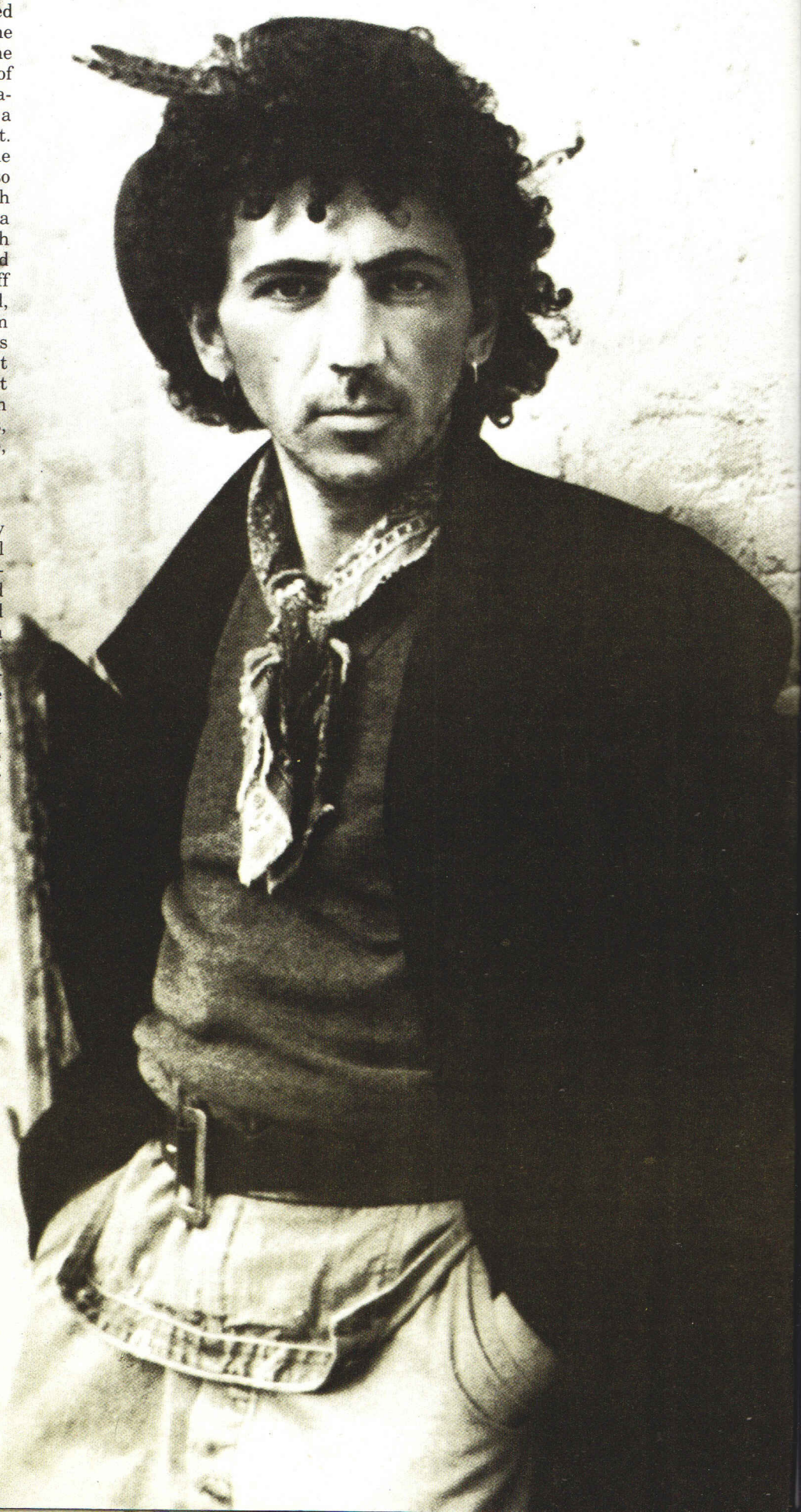
Dexys Midnight Runners first became known to the public when they appeared third on the bill to the Specials and the Selecter half-way through the 2-Tone package tour of Britain in the winter of 1979. Dexys later rejected their association with 2-Tone, although they did have a certain affiliation with the movement. Like the 2-Tone bands, they came from the Midlands (Birmingham) and they also played Sixties-influenced music, although their inspiration was not bluebeat and ska but soul. Their influences included both American artists on the Atlantic and Motown labels and British acts like Cliff Bennett and the Rebel Rousers and, especially, Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band. At the end of the tour, Dexys severed their 2-Tone links; they did not sign with the label but released their first single, 'Dance Stance', on ex-Clash manager Bernie Rhodes' Oddball Records, taking on Rhodes' associate, Dave Corke, as manager.

Off to a flying start

Dexys Midnight Runners were formed by singer/guitarists Kevin Rowland and Al Archer after their previous group, the Killjoys, had disbanded in 1977. Rowland and Archer decided to use what skill they had acquired from this initial venture to form a group playing the music they loved. It took a while for them to assemble a stable line-up, but by the time Dexys played the 2-Tone tour and recorded 'Dance Stance', Rowland and Archer had been joined by Pete Williams (bass, vocals), Pete Saunders (organ, piano), Bobby Junior (drums), Big Jim Paterson (trombone), Steve Spooner (alto sax) and tenor-sax player Jeff 'J.B.' Blythe, a highly accomplished and experienced musician and veteran of Geno Washington's Ram Jam Band. He was responsible for Dexys' distinctive brass arrangements such as the rousing intro of 'Dance Stance', a fine single that unaccountably failed to chart.

Rowland's vocal on the record was rather low-key, but by the time Dexys had signed with EMI and headlined their own Intense Emotion Revue tour in 1980, he and Archer had perfected a more dynamic and expressive style of taut, clipped consonants and slurred, choked vowels that were as melismatic as Sixties black soul singers but bore little or no trace of an American accent. The black singing style it most closely resembled was that of Chairman of the Board frontman General Johnson, whose 'Brrrr' vocal mannerism was employed to great effect by Rowland on Dexys' second single 'Geno'.

Dexys' novel approach extended beyond their music to include the 'working-class' dress of donkey-jackets, plimsolls and woolly hats worn by several of the band and their uncompromising attitude to their audiences. Both these aspects were



Celtic Soul

symptomatic of a determination to avoid the mannered approach of other British 'soul revival' acts and to create a modern, honest music that would rival in intensity that of the great soul artists of the Sixties.

'Geno' (a tribute to Geno Washington) hit the UK Number 1 spot just as the group, which now included Andy 'Stoker' Growcott (drums) and Andde Leek (keyboards), began its tour. Confronted by capacity audiences clamouring to hear 'Geno', Dexys insisted that the fans should take the rest of their show seriously, quickly gaining themselves a reputation for cantankerous behaviour.

Rowland implored the crowd to calm down and search for their 'inner soul', while the total silence required for the whispered intro to 'I'm Just Looking' was often obtained by Rowland, Archer, Spooner, Blythe, Williams and Paterson lining up at the front of the stage to stare down any hecklers. Dexys demanded the same degree of commitment to the music on the part of their fans as they gave themselves. This commitment was reflected by the group's frugal lifestyle on the road.

Left: Kevin Rowland, architect of Dexys Midnight Runners' Eighties success. Below: The band's original line-up, featuring guitarist Al Archer (second from left). Below right: Keeping the fans at bay.

Out of breath

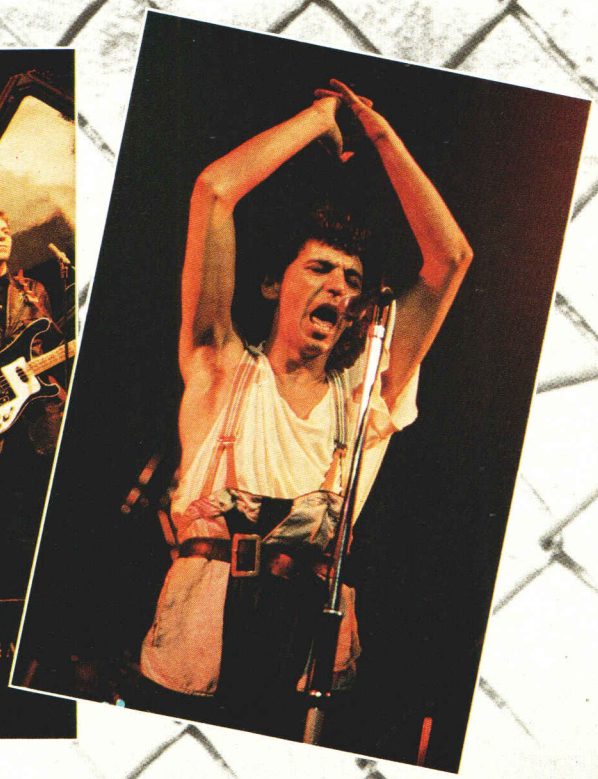
In July 1980, following a series of acrimonious press interviews, Dexys issued a statement in the music papers to the effect that henceforth their views would be published only in the form of their own 'essays'. This extraordinary move coincided with rumours that the group had hijacked the master tapes of their first LP, *Searching For The Young Soul Rebels* (1980), and were holding them while they argued with EMI about the terms of their contract. When they had resolved their difficulties with EMI, the album was released to ecstatic reviews. The ballad 'I Couldn't Help If I Tried' featured a particularly inspired vocal performance by Rowland, while 'There There My Dear' was a ferocious, brass-laden tirade against blindly following fashion. It later made Number 7 in the singles charts.

The album's killer punch, however, was 'Keep It', on which the horns simmered and then boiled over behind Archer's contemptuous vocal. The album also heralded the return of Saunders, following the departure of Andde Leek. After another British tour, Saunders left for good; he was replaced by Mick Talbot, formerly of South London group the Merton Parkas.

After returning from some successful dates in the US, Dexys went into hiding amid rumours that they had split up. In October, it was announced that Blythe, Spooner, Williams, Growcott and Talbot had left following a disagreement during a recording of the band's fourth single, 'Keep It Part II'. This turned out to be a re-recording of the album track with Rowland and Archer hysterically singing new lyrics that indicated the group's doubtful future.

The single flopped, and silence fell until the spring of 1981 when the departed members launched their new outfit, the Bureau, with singer Archie Brown, guitarist Rob Jones and trombonist Paul Taylor. The Bureau's shows were in the tradition of Dexys' early gigs and the band stressed their determination to retain the passion and integrity of their former outfit. Sadly, after the commercial failure of two singles and an album, the Bureau disbanded. Talbot later joined ex-Jam leader Paul Weller in the Style Council.

Meanwhile, Rowland, Archer and Paterson had recruited former Secret Affair



drummer Seb Shelton, keyboardist Micky Billingham, bassist Steve Wynne and sax-players Brian Maurice (alto) and Paul Speare (tenor). Before this new line-up could take the stage, however, Al Archer elected to strike out on his own and was replaced by guitarist Billy Adams.

Dexys' comeback single 'Plan B' was a glorious rush of sound kicked off by Rowlands' firm testament 'You've always been searching for something' and carried by a triumphant solo from Paterson, who had taken over from Archer and Blythe as Rowland's co-writer and the group's brass arranger. Over the next few months, the band gave sporadic performances of their Projected Passion Revue, immaculately turned out in hooded tracksuits, boxing boots and short pony-tails.

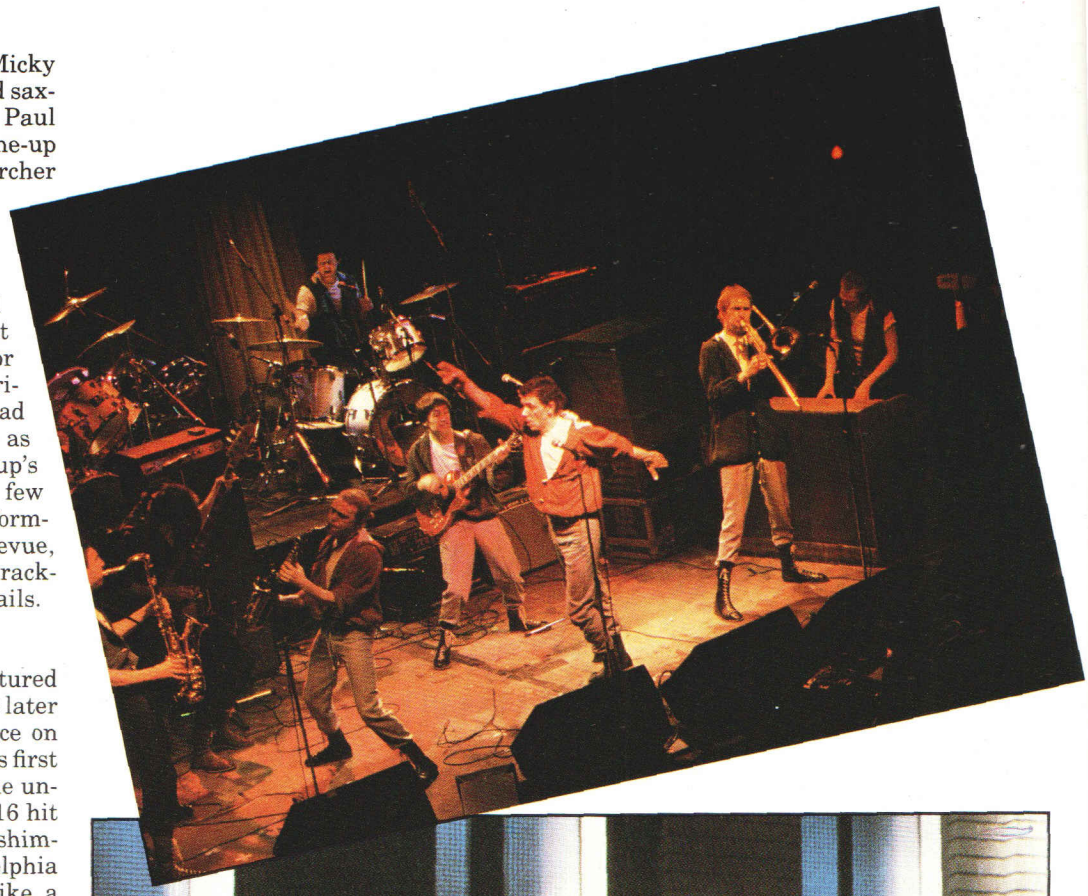
Emerald Express

The Projected Passion Revue also featured comedians, a dance troupe and, in the later shows, Paterson, Speare and Maurice on celli and viola. This string section was first heard on record on 'Liars A To E', the unsuccessful follow-up to the Number 16 hit 'Show Me'. Instead of mirroring the shimmering evanescence of the Philadelphia sound, the strings sounded more like a classical quartet. This intimate feel became a crucial part of Dexys' sound on the next single, 'The Celtic Soul Brothers', which saw Wynne replaced by Giorgio Kilkenny and the incorporation of fiddlers Steve Brennan and Helen O'Hara under the name of the Emerald Express.

Dexys' follow-up, 'Come On Eileen', brought the band their second UK Number 1 and featured brass alongside the strings of the Emerald Express. The resulting sound, superbly realised on the ballad 'Old' on the LP *Too Rye Ay* (1982) – was similar to, though slightly rougher than – the blend of Irish folk, soul and R&B pioneered by Van Morrison since *St Dominic's Preview* (1972). Dexys acknowledged their debt to Morrison by covering his 'Jackie Wilson Said' on *Too Rye Ay*; it later made Number 5 in the UK singles charts, while 'Come On Eileen' entered the US charts to provide Dexys with their first hit single in America.

To match the change in Dexys' music, the band used a different image to promote the LP, kitting themselves out like gypsies with tangled hair and tastefully torn dungarees. Although this look was supposed to have some sort of semi-mystical, Celtic significance, its adoption was a commercial masterstroke; it ensured that Dexys stood out from other Eighties rock groups, most of whom preferred to appear fresh-faced and *soigné* in tailored suits.

After working on the album, Paterson left the band. He was followed by Speare and Maurice, who joined him in the TKO Horns, a freelance brass team. Dexys thenceforth employed hired musicians to support the group's nucleus of Rowland, Shelton, Adams, Brennan and O'Hara.



Dexys' early-Eighties 'sporty' image (top) was succeeded by their Romany look (above).

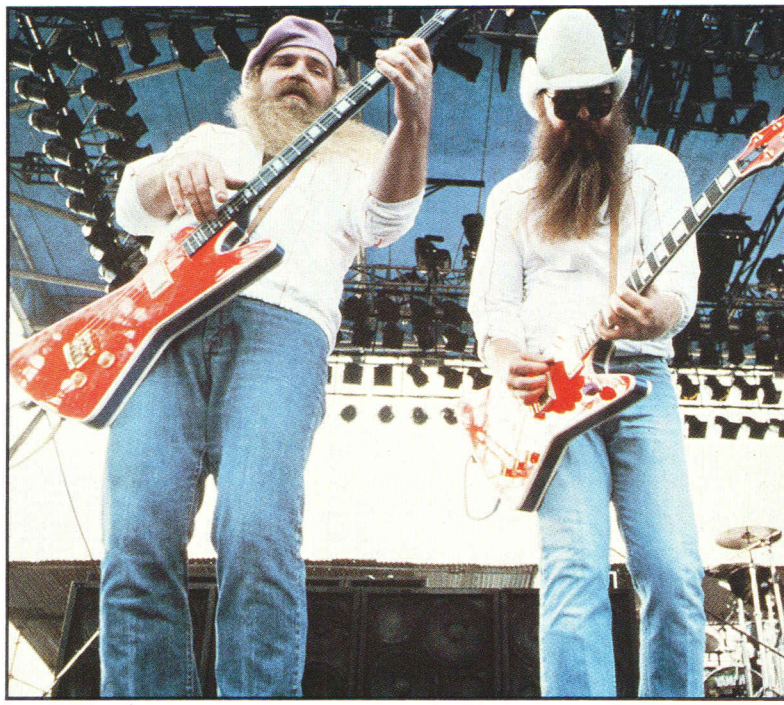
The charisma of lead singer Kevin Rowland, Dexys' collective enthusiasm and high standards of musicianship seemed set to ensure the band a particularly exciting future in the Eighties. JOHN VOYSEY

Dexys Midnight Runners Recommended Listening

Searching For The Young Soul Rebels (Late Night Feelings PCS 7213) (Includes: Geno, Burn It Down, Seven Days Too Long, Keep It, Love Part One, There There My Dear); *Too-Rye-Ay* (Mercury MERS 5) (Includes: Come On Eileen, The Celtic Soul Brothers, Jackie Wilson Said (I'm In Heaven When You Smile), Old, Plan B, I'll Show You).

THE GREAT MUSICIANS

Billy Gibbons



Above: Billy Gibbons (right) and bass player Dusty Hill spank their planks. Overleaf: Gibbons whips his Gibson Les Paul.

Billy Gibbons, guitarist with ZZ Top, was once asked what advice he would give to up-and-coming young guitarists. 'I think that they should go out and buy an album called *The Sounds Of The Drags*', he replied. 'It was a record released in America on Capitol Records of drag racers. And if they can absorb that hot-rod feel, then, man, they will spank that plank.' Gibbons was making the point that no matter what the musician's technique, the most important consideration for a guitar player is to tap a source of inspiration from which to inject a distinct feeling into his music.

In his own case, as with so many of his contemporaries, the starting point for Gibbons was the blues. His father, a pianist, was a professional musician most of his life, leading first the Freddy Gibbons Orchestra and then the Gibbons Brothers Band. When he was about 13, Billy got his first guitar, a Gibson Melody Maker, and a Fender Champ amplifier, and began learning to play. Initially, he took lessons, '. . . but then I took an abrupt left turn where the speed limit was a little higher. I came from the school of listening to records and copying the licks off records and listening to the late night radio.' The sounds he liked the best were those of Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, T-Bone Walker and B.B. King.

But Gibbons was far too imginative, bristling with energy and ideas, to become a blues purist. His intent was to take the blues guitar and extend it in any direction he could – and, in the late Sixties, he moved into psychedelia with the Moving Sidewalks. Gibbons struck up a friendship with Jimi Hendrix during a 1968 tour. 'He and I would sit in the backstage dressing room, and he'd say "Oh, yeah – do you know this?" and he'd whip out some savage lead. I'd say, "Well, ah, no. Could you go through it one more time?" Another influence was the British group Cream. 'You know the sweetest sound is Eric Clapton on *Fresh Cream*,' he once commented. 'Nasty but not too distorted.'

With his background and influences, it was obvious that a power trio would be the ideal setting for Gibbons, and since 1969 ZZ Top has been the vehicle for his talents. Over the years he has built up an uncanny rapport with the other two musicians, drummer Frank Beard and bassist Dusty Hill, and has concocted a style of playing that perfectly matches the various demands of a three-piece line-up, balancing rhythm against melody, riffs against lead solos, and colorations of tone against the need for overall power to fill out the sound.

Gibbons' playing naturally gravitated towards the way that English guitarists were interpreting the blues, 'because they didn't bend the notes too high, they had nice vibrato, excellent tones.' Thus on 'La Grange', from *Tres Hombres* (1973), Gibbons played in a more upfront boogie style, turning in a more conventional blues-based solo which featured one of his most notable trademarks at the end – a whole series of notes plucked in such a way as to leap an octave giving a distinctive harmonic squawk. He uses a 25-cent piece as a plectrum, and his grip and position when plucking the notes determines the precise character of his sound.

He has some interesting comments to offer on sound and tone quality generally. High volume is essential to his craft, but there are other considerations: 'Working with a trio, you really have to have a little grind, or else it's just too thin,' he has commented. Beyond this, he has often expressed a partiality to what he calls 'obscenity in tone', where a 'dirty' sound can enhance the mood or moment of a song. A very brief bridge in 'Cheap Sunglasses', on 1978's *Deguello*, demonstrated the point, coming at the very end of the riff breaks after each chorus. The sound is produced by using a custom-built device called a Bisarktone and it is an outlandish noise that somehow fitted the song perfectly.

For many years Gibbons' favourite guitar among his 200-strong collection was a flametop 1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard which he christened Pearly Gates, and it made an appearance on the 1983 album *Eliminator*. By that time, however, he and Dusty Hill had acquired a variety of matching Dean guitars, and even a pair of custom guitars built by Wayne Charvel made in the shape of the Eliminator drag-racing car after which the album was titled. The group's amps are custom-built too, by the aptly-named Jake Stack, a Texas engineer also responsible for the Bisarktone effect. Known as Rio Grandes, they are not far removed from a souped-up Marshall, Gibbons using them in combination with four 4×12 Vox speaker cabinets.

The diversity of Gibbons' abilities and interests encompassed a period of experimental work with French synthesiser group Artiste Contemporaire. Back on guitar with ZZ Top he is an adept slide player, utilises a wide variety of open and unusual tunings and handles the majority of the group's lead vocals. He is an accomplished harmonica player, dabbles with the fiddle and piano and even (along with Beard and Hill) taught himself enough saxophone for the three of them to accompany themselves as the Lone Wolf Horns on 'She Loves My Automobile' from *Deguello*. His guitar playing ranges from the neo-classical vein of 'Asleep In The Desert' from *Tejas* (1976), where he uses a gut-stringed acoustic, to his confident and imaginative use of pedals and gadgetry in the search for appropriate 'obscene' tones.

But above all else, Billy Gibbons has retained that raw enthusiasm and exuberant love of his skill which got him started in the first place. As he summed it up himself in a typically elegant turn of phrase: 'I like to give a guitar a good whippin'.'

DAVID SINCLAIR

TORY OF
ROCK